



Vox Populi

How singer-songwriter Victoria Vox became a full-on, pop-fueled, ukulele-toting chanteuse

By David Templeton

“The minute I picked up a ukulele, I became a better songwriter,” admits pop singer and ukulele provocateur Victoria Vox, punctuating her statement with a warm, non-ironic laugh. “It’s true! Once I figured out what I was doing, all of a sudden, I stopped writing all these depressing break-up songs, these moody what’s-wrong-with-my-family songs. I couldn’t do those on the ukulele.”

If there hasn’t been a university study on the psychological and sociological benefits of playing the ukulele, now might be a good time—and Victoria Vox could be the Test Case.

The acclaimed 36-year-old ukulele-playing singer-songwriter and recording artist—and one-time semi-gloomy guitar player—was born in Wisconsin, her father a musician, her mother an artist. Now residing in Baltimore, Maryland, Vox—née Victoria Davitt—explains that it was something about the lightness and simplicity of the ukulele that led to a more playful and melodic approach to songwriting.

“With the ukulele, it was suddenly less about me and more about the

song,” she says. “The first two songs I ever wrote on a uke were ‘Dreamin’ ‘Bout You’ and ‘Yodelayheehoo.’ Those are *not* songs I *ever* would have thought of writing on a guitar. The ukulele was a fresh sound, and in a lot of ways, a fresh start.”

For one thing, the ukulele makes for first-rate accompaniment alongside Vox’s superior “mouth-trumpet” skills, a rather non-mainstream talent she displays with particular glee on the aforementioned “Yodelayheehoo,” an upbeat song about feeling lonesome.

That song—along with several other originals and a rousing cover of David Byrne’s “Psycho Killer”—appear on the 2006 album *Victoria Vox & Her Jumping Flea*, Vox’s first all-ukulele recording effort after four previous records that showcased her voice and guitar playing.

Since adopting the ukulele, she has recorded seven more albums, including two—*Under the Covers* (2012) and *Key* (2013)—that derived from ambitious yearlong YouTube projects. A brand-new ukulele album, *When the Night Unravels*, (see review on page 65) is scheduled to be released in January.

CONNECTING THE DOTS

Growing up in Wisconsin, Vox was a self-described band geek. To be specific, a singing band geek.

“My voice was my first instrument,” she says. “As a kid, I would listen to songs on the radio, and think, ‘I bet I can make up my own songs!’ So I’d sit on the swing, and just sing whatever words came out of my mouth. I wrote my first song—actually sat down and wrote out the lyrics—when I was ten.”

To her fledgling singer-songwriter efforts, Vox soon added various musical instruments; she began playing the violin at age nine, the oboe at 11, and the trumpet at 14. It was at the age of 16, not long after her parents split and she moved to Green Bay with her mom, that Vox discovered the guitar. Moved by the pop music her mother played in the car (everything from Abba to Bonnie Raitt), she eventually began teaching herself to play, using a Janet Jackson songbook.

“The book showed the guitar chords,” Vox explains. “You know, the little diagrams with the lines and the black dots. I looked at those and went, ‘Well, I guess the dots are where my fingers are supposed to go.’ So I’d stumble my way through, figuring out how to play the song.

“G was especially tough,” she remembers. “The diagram showed it as a black dot at the third fret, and I’d think, ‘How the heck am I supposed to play that comfortably?’ I’d use my thumb and my ring finger, sort of wrapping my hand around the neck of the guitar.

“Later on, when I met other musicians, they’d go, ‘Actually, Victoria, there’s a better way to play a G’—and they’d show me. “And that,” she adds with a laugh, “is how I learned to play the guitar.”

By the time the ukulele entered her musical life, Vox was pursuing a degree in songwriting at Berklee College of Music in Boston. There,

she formed a band called Victoria and the Ultra Pink Bicycle Incident. As she tells the story today, the first time she was given the opportunity to play a ukulele, she didn’t see what the big deal was.

“I didn’t get it,” she admits. “It was at a gas station in Canada, where my band was traveling. We were in a U-Haul truck, and this guy, Bob, he handed me a ukulele and suggested I try it out.



“He played a lot of cheesy, comedic, perverted songs on the ukulele,” she says, “with lyrics like, ‘I wish I was a hula skirt, dangling from your hips, so I could look up at you, and see your smiling lips.’ I played around with the ukulele a few minutes, thinking, ‘Oh, it’s just like a guitar, except it has four strings.’ So I tried playing it like a bass, and I thought, ‘Well, that doesn’t work,’ so I gave up and handed it back.”

Then Vox had a funny thought.

“I remember thinking, ‘Wouldn’t it be cool if somebody took this instrument and figured out a way to, like, make *real* music with it?’”

Four years later, she’d taken to playing the Hawaiian uke legend Israel “Iz” Ka’ano’i Kamakawiwo’Ole’s arrangement of “Somewhere over the Rainbow” on her guitar as part of her regular repertoire. One night in Green Bay, Wisconsin, a local musician who was sharing a gig with her spontaneously produced a ukulele and joined her during her performance of “Rainbow.” Afterwards, he enthusiastically encouraged her to learn the ukulele if she was planning on keeping that song in her act.

“I’m like, ‘Whatever. I tried that, it didn’t work,’” she laughs. “I said, ‘I’m never buying a ukulele.’ And he said, ‘Fine, I’ll give you one of mine.’” From his collection of 35 ukes, her colleague offered one he thought would be good for a starter. Says Vox, “So I was thinking, ‘OK, wow. This is the second time someone tried to give me a ukulele. I guess I’m going to actually learn to play it this time.”

“And *that*,” she says, with a bemused wisp of triumph in her voice, “is how I learned to play the ukulele.”

ALOHA SPIRIT

As with the guitar, Vox taught herself to play the uke. She bought a beginner’s ukulele songbook, and practiced with “The Star Spangled Banner” and whatever else occurred to her. There are advantages, she now believes, to teaching herself from scratch. Primarily, it gave free rein to her own natural creativity and inventiveness.

“I’d play around and go, ‘Interesting! There are four strings, and I have four

fingers.’ Then I’d think, ‘Hey, when I do *this*, it sounds *dissonant*—but that’s kind of *cool*.’ Since I didn’t listen to a lot of ukulele music before I started writing on the ukulele, I wasn’t held back by knowing what it’s supposed to sound like.”

That said, Vox’s transition from guitar to uke was anything but effortless. “It took me about a year and a half to start thinking in ukulele chords,” she says. “It’s like learning a new language, a similar but different language.”

Eventually, Vox added a short ukulele segment to her guitar shows. In addition to “Somewhere over the Rainbow,” which she now performed in all its natural uke-powered glory, the set included the previously mentioned “Dreamin’ ‘Bout You” and “Yodelayheehoo”—complete with mouth-trumpet solo. She quickly

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learned that her audiences couldn’t get enough of the ukulele.

“People would call out, ‘Play more ukulele!’ and I’d have to say, ‘I only know three songs!’ They didn’t care. Some nights, I’d end up playing ‘Somewhere over the Rainbow’ two or three times.”

Eventually, she gave in, wrote a few more tunes, learned some unlikely covers—the Talking Heads’ “Psycho Killer,” anyone?—and recorded her first all-ukulele album.

Then she did what any fresh uke artist with a new album would do. She booked a 12-gig tour in Hawaii.

“I knew I couldn’t promote the show as if I was some fancy ukulele player,” she allows, “so my publicity was all about me being a singer-songwriter who just *happened* to have put out a ukulele album.”

This was in 2006, just as Jake Shimabukuro was causing a sensation

with his YouTube performance of “While My Guitar Gently Weeps.”

“Right before we left for Hawaii, a friend sent me that video,” Vox recalls with a pained groan, “and my heart sunk. I thought, ‘I quit!’ He’s so great. He does all these amazing things on the ukulele, and all I do is strum and sing.”

Encouraged by her family and fans, she forged ahead. It was her first time in Hawaii, and her spirits were high—at least until her first gig, at a kava bar in Honolulu, when she was asked, mid-show, to stop playing the ukulele and finish the show on guitar.

“They seemed OK when I started with ‘Over the Rainbow,’” she says, “and then I did a few of my own songs, and it was going great. I think the turning point was ‘Psycho Killer.’ After that, I was just bummed. I’m thinking, ‘OK, I just spent three grand in plane tickets. I just made this ukulele record. And now I’ve been asked to stop playing the ukulele. *In Hawaii*. And I still have *11 more shows*.”

Fortunately, at her next show, in Maui, the audience was not so traditional. They even enjoyed “Psycho Killer.”

“It was a bunch of ex-pats and artists and this-and-that, and they really got into it.” Contributing to the turnaround was an email she received the next day from Honolulu’s KoAloha Ukulele.

“They wrote, ‘We hope no one else has gotten to you yet. We’d like to be your official ukulele sponsor. We can tell from your album that you’ve got real ‘aloha spirit.’” It was a pivotal point for Vox. The rest of the tour proved tremendously successful, and by the time she returned to Wisconsin, she’d completed her transition from guitar-based singer-songwriter to full-on, pop-fueled ukulele chanteuse.

SENSE OF DISCOVERY

Vox hasn’t written on her guitar since 2007. The ukulele, Vox decided, is just too much fun.

“I love it,” she says, “whenever I figure out something new. Like when I learned that, on the ukulele, the chords are so flexible. Players can get really complicated with the chording, with their left hand, and what their hand’s positioning is on the neck. But the right hand is just as

important.” Her enthusiasm is contagious as she describes the process of learning different rhythms and strumming techniques.

“The two-and-four backbeat rhythm is just so awesome,” she says. “I learned that, and all of a sudden, I went, ‘Hey, I’ve got a whole rhythm section here.’ That pushed me to start thinking of different strums and different strum patterns. Not so much in a technical way, but in terms of the vibe and the sound I’m trying to get. I learned I could do a lot of different things with my right-hand rhythm.

“What can I say? I enjoy messing around and experimenting, figuring out what all my options are, and then doing what sounds best to me, and of course, what works best with the song I’m writing.” In many ways, Vox still approaches her art as if she has more to learn, certainly a key to her recent success.

“In college,” she muses, “that was all about being pushed to stretch and learn and acquire new skills. But since college, the only one who’s going to push me . . . is me.” Though already boasting a degree in songwriting—a piece of paper few songwriters can claim to have—Vox, in 2011, launched a project designed to make her an even better composer.

“I woke up one morning—January 7, 2011—and I was having one of those *Bridget Jones’s Diary* mornings,” she explains, “There’s that scene, where Bridget was on the couch crying, with Kleenex everywhere, and she was singing the song, ‘All By Myself.’

“So this was like that,” she goes on, “but in my case, I was singing Randy Newman’s ‘I Think It’s Going to Rain Today.’ I was laying in bed singing the bridge—‘Lonely . . . lonely . . .’—and I thought, ‘Wow, this is such a great song! I should learn it.’”

She got out of bed, downloaded the song on iTunes, and learned it by ear—not just strumming and singing, but really learning the song inside and out.

“It took me all day,” she says, “and by the end, I videotaped myself playing it, and uploaded it onto YouTube. I thought about how effective that was, getting myself out of my own depressing head for

one whole day, and I said to myself, ‘You should do this once a week for an entire year.’”

In retrospect, it was a crazy idea, perhaps, but she committed herself to the discipline of learning one cover every week, posting a video of each new song, and taking suggestions from her rapidly growing fan base of YouTube subscribers.

It’s an eclectic list: U2’s “All I Want Is You”; Liz Phair’s “F**k and Run”; Elton John’s “Bennie and the Jets”; Bruce Springsteen’s “I’m on Fire”; 10,000 Maniacs’ “Like the Weather”; Boy George’s “The Crying Game.”

“It was a very eye-opening year,” Vox sighs, nostalgically, “just soaking myself in those great melodies, those lyrics, those chord changes. I really learned a lot. That song by Queen, ‘Bicycle Race’—I had no idea! That song is so much more amazing than you can know just by listening to it. It was such an inspiration, and it really energized me to want to take what I was learning and use it in my own songs.”

Enter Phase Two.

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ORIGINALITY

By October of that year, fans started asking what she was going to do after she’d posted her final cover. Many informed her that they hoped she wouldn’t stop. “That’s when I said, ‘OK, people. Put your money where your mouth is. I’m done with learning covers; I will write one *new* song every week for one more year, but I need a little financial support.’”

By the end of the year, Vox had launched a Kickstarter campaign, promising that for \$52 per person, she would write 52

songs in 52 weeks.” And that’s what Vox did in 2012.

“I never believed I would have a shortage of ideas,” she says, answering one of the questions she was asked most often that year. Many of those 52 tunes have since been recorded by Vox, with one album, 2013’s critically acclaimed *Key*, made entirely of songs from the project.

“That songwriting project was the most rewarding thing I’ve ever done,” she says. “I was really sad when it ended. The last song I wrote was a song called ‘The Wildwood,’ about my grandparents putting their house on the market.

“It was a song about love and memory and loss—and it felt like the right one to end on.” When asked about the biggest lesson she learned from Phase Two, she sums it up in one word: “Discipline,” she laughs, then she adds a few more words. “I learned that a hundred half-finished songs are not worth what a single finished song is worth. I learned that not every song has to be brilliant, that sometimes you have to write a few duds to get to the really good ones.”

And finally, Vox says, she remembered, on a whole new level, what she’d known ever since she picked up her first instrument and taught herself to play.

“I learned that there is always room to improve,” she says, quite obviously meaning every word she says, “and that there is *always* something new to learn.” ■

